

**Meeting Minutes
Virginia Board of Education
Committee on the Lowest Performing School Systems**

Tuesday, February 22, 2005

Mr. Mark Emblidge, chairman of the committee, opened the meeting. Other Board of Education members in attendance were Mr. Thomas Jackson, Mr. David Johnson, Dr. Ella Ward, and Mr. Andrew Rotherham. Dr. Jo Lynne DeMary was also present.

Dr. James Heywood briefed the committee on the academic review process with specific attention to the efforts of the Lee County and Petersburg City school divisions. Dr. Heywood reviewed the achievement results that “trigger” division-level academic reviews, which include the placement of a division in “improvement status” under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Dr. Heywood also noted that four school divisions, which include Lee County and Petersburg, have voluntarily requested division-level reviews.

Dr. Heywood covered the division-level review process in Lee County. This review was undertaken in 2004. Statistics were presented regarding Lee County public schools student attendance, graduation rate, and teacher qualifications relative to the rest of the Commonwealth. Among the findings of the review team were: 1) teachers have a written curriculum but little evidence is shown that it is being used; 2) the use of the PASSMARK test has just begun and use is not fully implemented; 3) a division-wide plan is needed to ensure quality instruction and staff development; and 4) the division’s improvement plan has not been incorporated into the six-year plan required under the Standards of Quality. Dr. Heywood indicated that approximately one in five students in Lee County attends a “warned” school.

The pass rate in Lee County for SOL English in grades three and eight is 69% and 54%, respectively. The statewide pass rates for SOL English for these two grades is 71% and 72%, respectively. For the math SOLs, the eighth grade pass rate in Lee County is 55% while the statewide pass rate is 80%. Second quarter PASSMARK test results for English in Lee County indicated that four percent (4%) of students achieved a score greater than 79 percent in grade eleven. The second quarter PASSMARK test results for math in Geometry indicate that seven percent (7%) of students achieved a score greater than 79 percent.

Mr. Robert McCoy, superintendent of Lee County schools, discussed the results of the division’s progress with the committee. Mr. Emblidge asked Mr. McCoy if he was receiving the support that he needed from the Lee County School Board to implement change. Mr. McCoy indicated that his board was supportive and cautioned that committee that the top leadership in this division may be completely wiped out due to his impending retirement and the anticipated departure of several other staff members. Mr. McCoy also indicated to the committee that, until about one week prior to the meeting, he had no diagnostic test results available to use as a benchmark for progress. Now that PASSMARK test results are available, Mr. McCoy expects to be able to make further progress to improve achievement.

Mr. McCoy pointed out to the committee that every school in Lee County is fully accredited with the exception of one. He also indicated that more training has begun within the division and also pointed out that missing school time due to athletic events has played a part in student achievement problems. Mr. McCoy is working to make changes in this area.

Dr. Ward asked about the timeline for staff development in the division. Mr. McCoy indicated that he was unable to provide an answer at this time. Mr. Johnson asked if there would be a monitoring system to ensure that the proper curriculum is taught. Mr. McCoy pointed out that the PASSMARK test results were very helpful in this regard.

Dr. DeMary asked about the superintendent search process in Lee County. Mr. McCoy responded that he is scheduled to retire on June 30 and that he expects the search process to commence in March.

Mr. Emblidge asked Mr. McCoy to continue to work with the local school board members to ensure that the process is understood. Mr. Jackson asked Mr. McCoy if he has the proper technological foundation in place to analyze data. Mr. McCoy responded that this was the case.

Dr. Heywood covered the division-level review process in Petersburg City. This review was undertaken in 2004. Statistics were presented regarding Petersburg City public schools student attendance, graduation rate, and teacher qualifications relative to the rest of the Commonwealth. Nineteen (19%) percent of the school division's teachers are considered provisional teachers, compared to the eight (8%) percent figure statewide. Ninety-four (94%) the division's students are attending "warned" schools. Among the findings of the review team were: 1) teachers have a written curriculum and monitoring is in place; 2) the use of the PASSMARK test is in place with some implementation problems; 3) staff development has been provided; and 4) close monitoring and assessment of results/effectiveness is needed. Dr. Heywood pointed out that this division has replaced twenty-five percent (25%) of its teachers this year.

The 2003-2004 pass rate in Petersburg City for SOL English in high school is 76%, while the statewide pass rates for SOL English in high school is 89 percent. For the math SOLs in high school, the pass rate in Petersburg City is 42% while the statewide pass rate is 84%. Second quarter PASSMARK test results for English in Petersburg City indicated that one percent (1%) of students achieved a score greater than 79 percent in grade eleven. The second quarter PASSMARK test results for math in Geometry indicate that one percent (1%) of students achieved a score greater than 79 percent.

Petersburg City school board chair, Fred Wilson, and division superintendent, Lloyd Hamlin, discussed the division's progress with the committee. Mr. Emblidge asked what support the board was providing to improve achievement. Mr. Wilson pointed out that superintendent turnover has caused problems and that an elected board has also contributed to problems within the division. Mr. Wilson also pointed out that the division did not plan well for the SOL tests in the 1996-1998 time frame. He also indicated that, until 2002, an aligned curriculum did not exist. In 2003, board direction was a problem. Mr. Wilson did indicate that progress should be achieved if the board can stay focused. Mr. Wilson pointed out that teacher training and retention continues to be a problem.

Dr. Ward asked what actions are being taken to address the problems with provisional licenses. Mr. Wilson commented that the division has offered special housing and mentoring opportunities. However, the locality is limited in terms of funding. He also pointed out that the board has a good relationship with the City Administrator.

Mr. Hamlin indicated that there is a great deal of turnover because of the “highly-qualified” status. For instance, a Petersburg teacher could go to Richmond City and received a \$19,000 pay differential. Mr. Hamlin also indicated that new teachers are often congregated to certain grades.

Dr. Ward asked if grant dollars could be used to train staff. Mr. Hamlin responded that the division did not have the staff to support comprehensive training so city-wide training was instituted with some local funds.

Mr. Jackson asked how the division’s situation could be turned around. Mr. Wilson indicated that behavior needs to change and that teachers need more control. This is now happening. The first semester of this school year was the toughest test and that the socio-economic situation presents a major challenge. Mr. Wilson also said that the division and board cannot afford to make excuses. Mr. Jackson pledged to work with Petersburg and pointed out that, in a business environment, management would be changing.

Mr. Hamlin pointed out that a process is being put in place to evaluate middle and high schools and to make recommendations to the school board. He also pointed out that in Petersburg high schools, only four (4) of thirteen (13) teachers are certified.

Dr. DeMary pointed out that the division needs some dramatic gains and wants to see what can be done to affect some immediate impact. Mr. Hamlin concurred with this recommendation. He also stated that there is no school choice currently available in Petersburg.

Mr. Don Soifer of the Lexington Institute provided an overview of charter school reform to the committee. He pointed out that statistics show that charter schools are serving a higher percentage of students who: 1) receive free- or reduced-price lunch; 2) are African-American; and 3) are Hispanic.

Mr. Soifer pointed out that there were seven (7) charter schools in Virginia in 2003-2004. Two (2) schools closed in 2004-2005 due to funding problems. Mr. Soifer also covered the current laws related to charter schools in the Commonwealth.

Dr. DeMary asked what is needed in Virginia for more charter schools to be established. Mr. Soifer indicated that more leadership is needed with a more vigorous movement. He also pointed that charter schools close for academic and funding reasons.

Mr. Jackson asked what Virginia could do to tie charter schools to the issue of low-performing schools. Mr. Soifer responded that the actions of the Board of Education’s review committee are helpful in that technical assistance and advice is provided. The pursuit of federal funding is also worthwhile.

Mr. Emblidge asked what the best argument is in a poor-performing district for a charter school. Mr. Soifer pointed out that the Mosaica project in the District of Columbia was a good example of a charter school that has been successful in a low-performing district.

Mr. Rotherham commented that community-based organizations have been a driving influence for charter schools and he inquired as to why this had not happened in Virginia. Mr. Soifer commented that higher education partnerships are crucial and believes that this will develop in Virginia.

Dr. DeMary pointed out that the school boards in Virginia with the greatest need often are the least interested in charter schools. Mr. Soifer pointed out that a more vibrant charter school system is needed in the Commonwealth. In Oregon, school boards have taken a greater interest.

Mr. Johnson asked what single factor is most critical to charter school success. Mr. Soifer pointed out that the principal is key. He also indicated that charter school employees may be better off not to be employed by local school boards.

The next meeting of the committee will be March 22.